Authentic Materials: Selection and Implementation in Exercise Language Training

By Valeriu Dumitrescu

In the course of the last ten years, the use of authentic materials has become increasingly popular in learning situations that range from traditional intensive ESL to language training for professionals. Particularly in the latter setting, many instructors are starting to recognize the possibilities offered by material that is not bound by textbook format limitations and can be applied to multiple tasks and learning objectives.

Authentic materials, when appropriately selected and implemented, can be used to develop tasks that depart from formulaic language learning and provide a bridge between the linguistic skills of learners and their professional knowledge goals. Such materials, in their various formats, can provide a wealth of linguistic and conceptual content to learners who are focused on specific applications of their linguistic skills.

The field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), by its narrowly defined nature, requires the use of content materials that are not always constructed for the purpose of language learning. In seeking to identify and implement the most useful and relevant material for ESP courses, instructors need to design and organize classroom tasks that material for ESP courses, instructors need to design and organize classroom tasks that facilitate a sequence of information gathering, processing and presentation.

The use of authentic materials in the language classroom presents instructors with several challenges. One such challenge is development of effective research skills required to manage the vast amount of information available in written, spoken, or multimedia format. An additional challenge is the selection of material most appropriate to the objectives of a curriculum, a course, or even a single task. A third challenge is the implementation of materials and the subsequent demands of flexibility and adaptation of instruction that may not be confined to a traditional classroom setting.

Research

Attempting to find the exact materials in a vast sea of professional publications and media formats can be a daunting task for any language instructor. The first step in identifying appropriate materials is to gather samples of professional writing, reading, and other training materials from the trainees' place of employment. Using the Internet has also become an increasingly useful tool. With one million pages of information added every day, the Internet is indispensable to any instructor looking for specialized content.

One of the more effective sources of information available in print or electronic form is the corporate annual report. The variety of topics available in annual reports allows instructors to address a multitude of language skills in a context that contains relevant business terminology and is developed around meaningful business concepts. Allowing the trainees to work with unified bodies of information also lends cohesiveness to training and the overall skill-building process. The last section of this article provides examples of tasks based on the content of a corporate annual report.

Selection

In selecting the right materials, the instructor needs to consider at least three basic aspects of the trainees' backgrounds:

1. linguistic

2. conceptual

3. cultural

Linguistic background influences classroom management, the selection of tasks, the sequencing and execution of tasks, and the focus of microskill instruction (such as pronunciation and accent reduction). Conceptual (or knowledge) background determines the need for specificity or generality of information in the selected materials. Cultural background affects trainee-instructor interaction, the formality or informality of classroom interaction, and expectations of traditional instructor and trainee/student roles.

Any instructor, whether conducting training in a domestic setting or abroad, needs to develop a strong awareness of these aspects. Knowing what to expect and how to react to demands that are culturally defined, influenced by traditional systems of education, and characteristic of specific professions, will help the instructor effectively manage both the training process and its outcome.

Two additional factors that influence the final decision of what materials to incorporate into specific language tasks are *applicability* and *adaptability*. The trainees' current career goals will affect the range of applicability of the material. A body of authentic text containing very broad business concepts, for example, can be considered useful if its content can be integrated into tasks that are relevant to all trainees, regardless of their specialization. At the same time, a large body of text, such as an annual report, might contain a variety of specialized information sufficient to address individual needs demonstrated in the student population. Generally, the content of the material is more easily understood and processed by trainees when it is closely related to their field of employment, the industry in which they work, and their professional reality.

Adaptability refers to the ease of task design and ease of text manipulation. If the material can be incorporated into both oral and written communication courses, its adaptability makes it more suitable for classroom use than material that can be applied to only one task.

Numerous aspects of oral communication, for instance, can be addressed in the context of a management meeting, with agenda items drawn from the trainees' daily professional interactions. This kind of oral communication exercise enables the instructor to focus on the accuracy of key expressions, the appropriateness of vocabulary, and interaction protocol. In the absence of information about the trainees' professional activities, the contents for the meeting's agenda can be gathered from the contents of an annual report. This can then be synthesized and organized for presentation, allowing trainees to generate a practical context for language application.

Implementation and Design

Incorporating the material into classroom tasks is often difficult because of the perception that language tasks are incompatible with the rhetorical organization of business material. However, once the business material is identified and the instructors determine what part can be incorporated into what task, the material can be manipulated to serve learners at different proficiency levels, each with diverse linguistic objectives. The materials can be used in whole or in part, and conceptual complexity can be reduced or increased according to the individual or collective goals of trainees.

Most instructors are accustomed to diverging from the textbook and customizing classroom tasks to some degree. Maintaining elements of textbook-driven structure allows them to develop tasks that retain familiar elements of organization, and to incorporate new information from authentic sources with greater ease. However, designing tasks based on authentic materials alone requires instructors to start the material design process from a less organized and more ambiguous level. Once a certain body of information is identified, instructors must decide the most appropriate means of implementation in the classroom.

Several factors can serve as general guidelines for this decision. The main one is content relevance. The material must contain terminology, concepts, and linguistic complexity that reflects the students' background knowledge.

Additionally, the material needs to contain linguistic elements applicable to the general objectives of the training and the trainees' individual goals and practical skill-building requirements. The more relevant the material is to the trainees' professional activities, the more effective the training becomes. Furthermore, tasks addressing immediate communication needs are more likely to be perceived as significant than tasks addressing skills that may be used at a later stage in the trainee's career.

Another factor that affects implementation of authentic materials is meaningful skill acquisition. Trainees who are exposed to contextualized skill practice have the chance to explore the flexibility of their skills and experiment with new professional applications. This process allows trainees and instructors alike to assess the usefulness of any particular body of materials and reassess priorities of learning objectives.

Conclusion

While authentic materials hold great promise for trainees who are focused on practical language use, the use of authentic language contexts does not relieve the instructor's burden of materials development. On the contrary, the process of development for courses based on authentic materials requires longer time frames and more complex designs than it does for textbook-based courses. Many instructors may be dissuaded from using authentic materials because they require an initial investment of time that may not be feasible or realistic in the instructors' teaching situation. Each instructor must make a decision on how important authentic material is to a particular program, based on the program's goals.

When instructors decide that authentic material will make significant contributions toward meeting a program's learning objective, the process described here may be used as a starting point in researching, identifying, and accumulating appropriate materials. Each body of authentic text, speech, or video segment must be matched with expected language skill outcomes and evaluated using the criteria described here or additional criteria developed for specific programs and situations. To further illustrate the flexible nature of authentic materials, some tasks based on a corporate annual report are described on the next page.

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